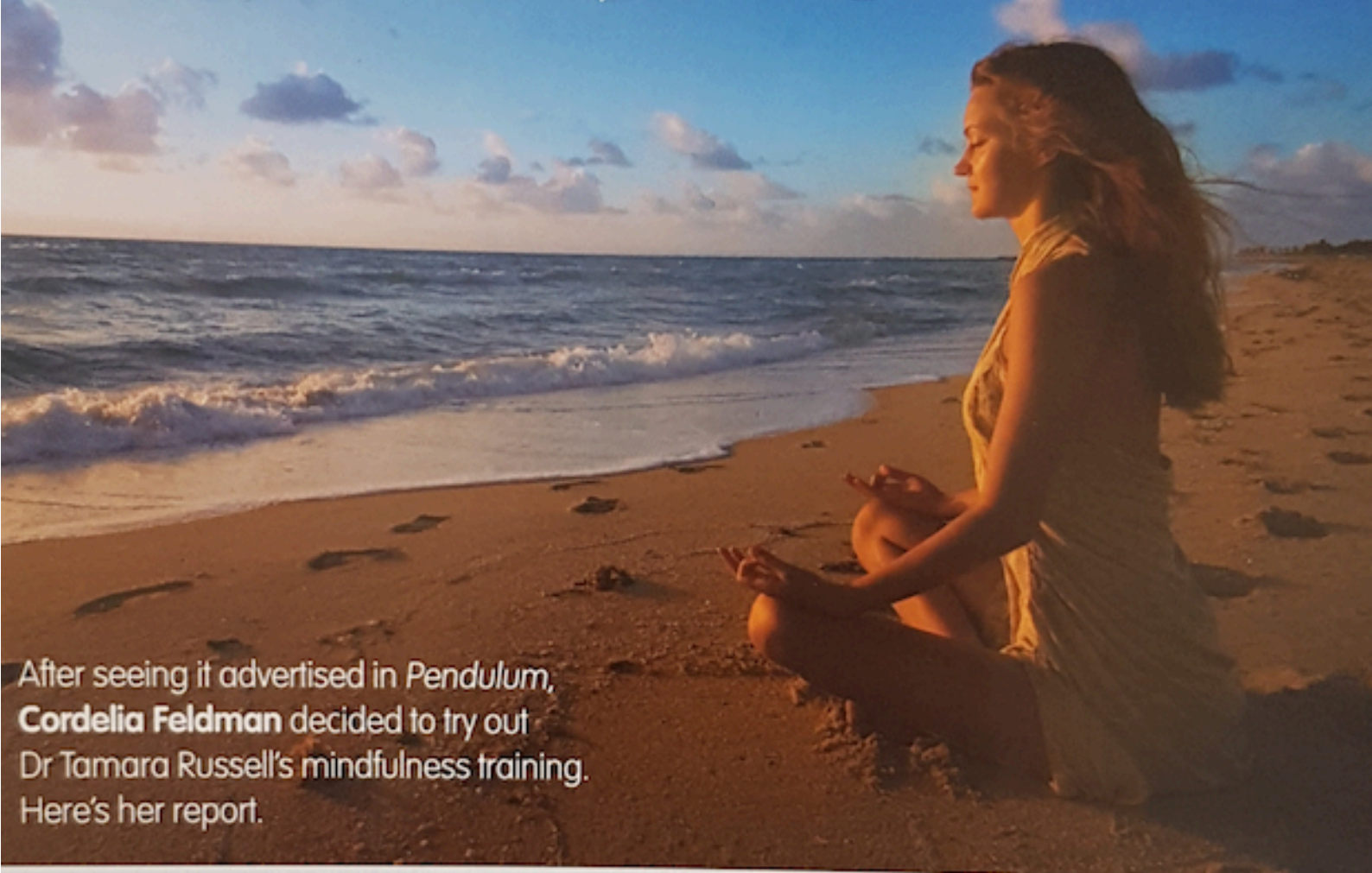


# Mind training for happy, healthy living



After seeing it advertised in *Pendulum*, **Cordelia Feldman** decided to try out Dr Tamara Russell's mindfulness training. Here's her report.

**IMAGINE IF THERE** was a way that you could change the shape of your brain and in the process ameliorate depression, eczema, back pain, psoriasis and irritable bowel syndrome and reduce the symptoms of anxiety.

Imagine if you could achieve results after a mere eight weeks. It sounds impossible — but there is a treatment that claims to do all these things — mindfulness — and there are various studies which bear out these results.

I have been interested in trying out mindfulness for a while. An ex-boyfriend who is now in a Buddhist monastery has done a lot of meditation. He told me he thought I would find it beneficial.

Friends with Borderline Personality Disorder have undergone DBT — which is a similar treatment — and obtained great results from it. In fact, I had been looking for a suitable programme for a while, but had been unable to find one, when I saw the advert in *Pendulum* for volunteers to take part in a trial mindfulness group, specially tailored for people with bipolar disorder.

## CURIOUS BUT SCEPTICAL

And so, I turned up on that first Monday night curious, happy to be there, but sceptical. Since my diagnosis eleven years ago, I have made some progress with dealing with the disorder day to day, but despite many sessions with different psychologists trumpeting a variety of different methods, no psychological interventions have been any help at all.

It soon became clear that Dr Tamara Russell is not your average psychologist. She is trained in martial arts, young and dynamic with an infectious laugh and boundless energy. I warmed to her immediately and it was obvious that the others in the group did too. There were about 15 of us and everyone had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and were working at least part-time.

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Dr Tamara Russell: not your average psychologist

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focus on them — and another track every day, noting down which tracks we listened to, and any feelings we noticed, in a 'mindfulness record' — a sort of homework diary.

### BEING KIND TO YOURSELF

What is different about mindfulness compared with other treatments is the emphasis it places on being kind to yourself, treating all thoughts and feelings as the same and being curious about them, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.

There are no right or wrong answers. All thoughts and feelings are equally important or unimportant and they are not real — they will pass. This way of viewing things seems quietly revolutionary, and already I am feeling freer from the tyranny of thoughts and feelings that I had experienced previously.

Another positive thing about it is that it is easy and pleasurable to

listen to the meditation tracks. I began to look forward to listening to the CDs and am filling in my homework diary every day, and experienced no resistance towards doing the work. This was unusual. I had always found it impossible to do the homework for other psychologists.

### FOCUS ON THE BREATH

The breath is very important in mindfulness, as when we are focused on the breath we are completely in the moment and not thinking about the past or future. So there were various breathing exercises on the CD and that we practised in class.

This focus on the breath can be very helpful in reducing anxiety and quietening the mind, and of course can be done in any stressful situation: crowded trains, shops or meetings for example. When I was waiting



Dr Russell leads a mindfulness workshop at this year's National Conference

*'I urge you to give mindfulness a go.  
It might just change your life.'*

for a friend to meet me the other day, and she was late, and we needed to get to a concert, I did some 'mindful breathing' and was able to keep calm. Before the course, that situation would have made me very anxious.

#### **OPEN AWARENESS**

The programme also places an emphasis on 'open awareness': noticing sounds in the environment around you and treating all sounds the same, whether pleasant or unpleasant, so as not to become distressed by sounds you would characterise as unpleasant, but simply to let them wash across the mind.

In fact, there is an emphasis on increasing awareness generally in the programme: from eating slowly and carefully, really savouring the food and thinking about where it has come from, rather than bolting it down in front of the TV, which is called 'mindful eating'; to 'mindful walking' where you walk in a way where you notice all the

sights and sounds around you.

By doing everything mindfully you will increase your focus and perform tasks more efficiently. We were encouraged to think about the ways in which we use technology at work and at home and to try to simplify our lives by concentrating on one thing at a time.

#### **GROUP SUPPORT**

The group setting was very supportive and we were able to encourage each other to keep going with the practice. As the course progressed it was great to hear people's stories of how they were incorporating mindfulness into their daily routines with positive results. By the last session, everyone in the group was saying that they felt that the mindfulness programme had helped them to deal with stressful situations better and to feel more relaxed.

My psychiatrist, friends and family started to comment on how much more relaxed I seemed. I told them it was due to the mindfulness. I am



definitely going to continue meditating. I have already signed up for a six-week programme starting in September and have started attending a weekly meditation class at a local yoga centre. Even though the course has now finished I am continuing to listen to the CDs every day and am filling in my homework diary.

### JUST THE BEGINNING

My mood has remained level so far and I am really hoping that when the inevitable drop occurs in my mood, I will be able to deal with it better than I have done in the past, using the new techniques I have learned on the course. Of course, there is the hope that if I continue to meditate, my mood will remain level, but even if it doesn't, I'm just at the beginning of training my brain.

Dr Tamara Russell will be running more mindfulness courses for people with bipolar disorder and there are details here: [www.mindbodymot.com](http://www.mindbodymot.com). I urge you to give mindfulness a go. It might just change your life.

## Latest results

Dr Tamara Russell highlights the findings of her study on mindfulness

### HOT OFF THE PRESS!

Tamara and her students Marian and Ellie have just completed the analysis of the questionnaire data from the Mindfulness Toolkit for work project. Thank you to all the participants who took part and completed all the paperwork in a timely fashion.

Complete datasets were obtained from twenty participants and statistical tests were conducted to see if there were significant changes on any of the questionnaire measures.



Dr Russell at the 2011 National Conference

On the two questionnaires that measured mindfulness ability there were significant increases. This is great as firstly it lets us know that mindfulness training occurred following the Body In Mind Training, and secondly, increases in mindfulness are linked to a wealth of mental and physical health benefits. A very pleasing result!

On the test of perceived stress there was a significant decrease. In terms of work and social adjustment, there was a significant decrease (indicative of less impairment) and on a scale measuring anxiety and depression there was also a significant reduction.

Of note, participants' perception of the control, demand and support at their workplace did not change over the course of the training so it is inferred that changes in work context were not responsible for improvements.

Of course, some of these effects may be related to more general, non-mindfulness related influences, for example being in a group with others and being able to share experiences, or changes in medication or other therapies that happened at the same time.

Future studies where there is an "active" control group for comparison (for example a general support group or relaxation group) would address this important methodological issue.

These early results are very promising and the feedback forms indicated that participants really felt they had benefited and been able to implement some small aspect of mindfulness into their working life to good effect. More detailed results can be found at [www.mindbodymot.com](http://www.mindbodymot.com) and we hope shortly to write up this paper for publication in a journal. Thank you again BMT Pioneers!